

HOMELAND SECURITY

Committee Republicans Blast Inaction On Authorization Bill

A feud erupted today between Republicans and Democrats on the House Homeland Security Committee over whether legislation authorizing programs and polices for the Homeland Security Department will be done this year. "I've seen nothing to indicate there is going to be an authorization bill," House Homeland Security ranking member **Peter King** said in an interview. "If not, it's going to be a tragic mistake." The annual Homeland Security authorization bill is a way for lawmakers to direct the sprawling department, which has grown in size and budget every year since it was created in 2003. The committee has marked up an authorization bill every year since 2004, including when King was chairman in 2006 and last year under the leadership of House Homeland Security Chairman **Bennie Thompson**. But Congress has never sent a final authorization bill to the White House, because it either did not get through the full House or was never taken up in the Senate. King and committee Republicans believe it is critical for the committee to keep producing an authorization bill every year to set national homeland security policy and further establish the committee's jurisdiction in Congress, where several panels claim some authority over department programs. King said time is running out to get a bill done this year, given the congressional schedule and national elections this fall. "Usually by now staff would be getting started," King said. "The longer we go without a bill the harder it is to get it done."

Thompson's strategy is to get the Senate to approve the authorization bill that was passed by the House last year. "We are currently working with the Senate to move the authorization bill that was passed in the House," Thompson said in a statement. He was able last year to produce an authorization bill before appropriators did the annual Homeland Security spending bill. "In addition, later this month, we will be begin marking [up] smaller pieces of legislation that contain authorizing language," Thompson added. Those smaller bills, or language from them, could be incorporated into an authorization bill during conference negotiations. But it is far from clear that the Senate will take up a bill. "We are seriously considering producing our own authorization bill but, of course, we will work with the House committee as we go forward," said a spokeswoman for Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Chairman **Joseph Lieberman**.

King criticized Thompson's strategy. "Last year was last year. Real committees do it every year," King said. "A year is a long time in terms of homeland security -- a lot has changed. Our committee needs to be proactive and show leadership on the multitude of complex homeland security issues facing our nation." Republicans referenced a letter Democrats sent to King in March 2006, when he was chairman, strongly urging him to do an authorization bill. The letter was signed by every Democrat on the committee, including Thompson. "We are concerned the Committee's credibility is at stake should a comprehensive authorization bill not be undertaken this year," the Democrats wrote. "Let us remember that during the height of the Cold War, the Armed Services Committee produced an authorization bill for the Department of Defense every single year. We should expect no less from the Committee on Homeland Security during the height of the War on Terror. The security of the American people is at stake." King acknowledged it took several months to mark up an authorization bill in 2006 because the committee was working on other legislation, but said the panel ultimately approved a bill.

-- by *Chris Strohm*